

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE
JOHN W. COULTER RESIDENCE (41BZ151)
IN BRAZOS COUNTY, TEXAS

Texas Antiquities Permit Number 2694

by
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Brazos Valley Research Associates
Contract Report Number 94

2001

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JOHN W. COULTER RESIDENCE (41BZ151)
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BVRA Project Number 01-19

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological investigations at the John W. Coulter residence in Bryan, Texas was performed by Brazos Valley Research Associates (BVRA) of Bryan, Texas in September 2001 at the request of the City of Bryan. The work was performed under Antiquities Permit 2694 with William E. Moore the Principal Investigator. This study involved mechanical stripping of an area with a gradall to expose the subsurface where pre-1870 historic features might be present. The potential of such features is based on the presence of a 19th century structure on the property that may have been constructed between 1867 and 1870.

This investigation revealed the presence of "plow scars." These scars were observed to be oriented at 40 degrees east of north, a pattern not consistent with the current orientation of the city block as currently platted. This indicates that the area was cultivated prior to platting at the City of Bryan and prior to construction of the original John W. Coulter residence in the 19th century.

One historic feature, a small, amorphous trash dump containing glass, metal, ceramics, brick, and animal bone was observed as a result of this investigation. The artifacts in this shallow, amorphous deposit date to the early 20th century. They were not collected.

It is concluded that the area examined was probably used as a pasture throughout the occupation of this site. This use, apparently post-dating cultivation of the tract, is confirmed by a verbal description of the block by an earlier resident of the area. This informant stated that part of the current project area was used as pasture for a cow. There was a small pond in the pasture area, but its location has not been identified.

Copies of the report are on file at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL), the Texas Historical Commission, Archeology Division, and the Texas Department of Transportation in Austin Texas, and BVRA in Bryan, Texas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to those who assisted me in this project. At the City of Bryan, Roy Ross (Assistant Director for Administration in the Community Services Department) provided maps, photographs, and reports discussing the history of the project area. Cindy Tennis, archaeologist at the Texas Department of Transportation, was the coordinator for this project, and Miles Miller at the Archeology Division, Texas Historical Commission served as the reviewer for that agency. I am especially grateful to Roger G. Moore of Moore Archeological Consulting for taking time from his busy schedule to visit the site and help monitor the subsurface investigation. Eleanor Dahlin drew the soil profile that appears in this report and served as monitor in the absence of Roger G. Moore and the Principal Investigator. Ms. Dahlin, a former employee of Moore Archeological Consulting, has considerable experience in similar projects in the Houston metropolitan area and is currently a graduate student in Anthropology at Texas A&M University. Lili G. Lyddon prepared the maps and figures in this report for publication.

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Bryan proposes to construct a visitor center on a tract of land that contains two standing structures dating to the 19th century and the footprint of a more recent house that was constructed in 1903 by John William Coulter, a prominent Bryan businessman. The site of the current project area occupies Block 51 bounded by William J. Bryan Parkway on the north, 26th Street on the south, Preston Street on the east, and Houston Street on the west. Funding will be provided by the Statewide Transportation Enhancement Program through the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). Construction of the visitor and parking lot will be restricted to the eastern half of Block 51, an area that remains open and undeveloped. It is this area that is the focus of this study.

It is the intent of the City of Bryan to integrate the standing structures into the visitor center complex. The original house and the carriage house have been restored by descendants of the Coulter family. The carriage house will be an integral part of the visitor center as it will contain displays that will interpret modes of transportation from 1880 to the present. The purpose of the museum will be to educate visitors as to the part the carriage house played in the surface transportation system and how that system evolved. Other transportation related displays would also be utilized to enhance this central theme. The footprint of the 1903 house built by Mr. Coulter will be preserved, and a dry rock wall will be placed along the footprint in order to define the limits of this house. The site of the project area and its location within Brazos County is depicted in Figure 1.

It is important to note here that the city block with its two 19th century structures have been deemed eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places by the State Historic Preservation Officer, Texas Historical Commission. Since state funding is being made available for this project, it was requested by TxDOT that the area where construction is planned must be examined to locate any significant historic features that may be present. In order to satisfy this requirement, the City of Bryan contracted with Brazos Valley Research Associates (BVRA) to perform a subsurface survey of the project area and make recommendations regarding any future work that may be necessary prior to construction of the visitor center. Block 51 as it appears today, with the exception of the 1912 structure now demolished, showing the area of proposed construction is depicted in Figure 2.

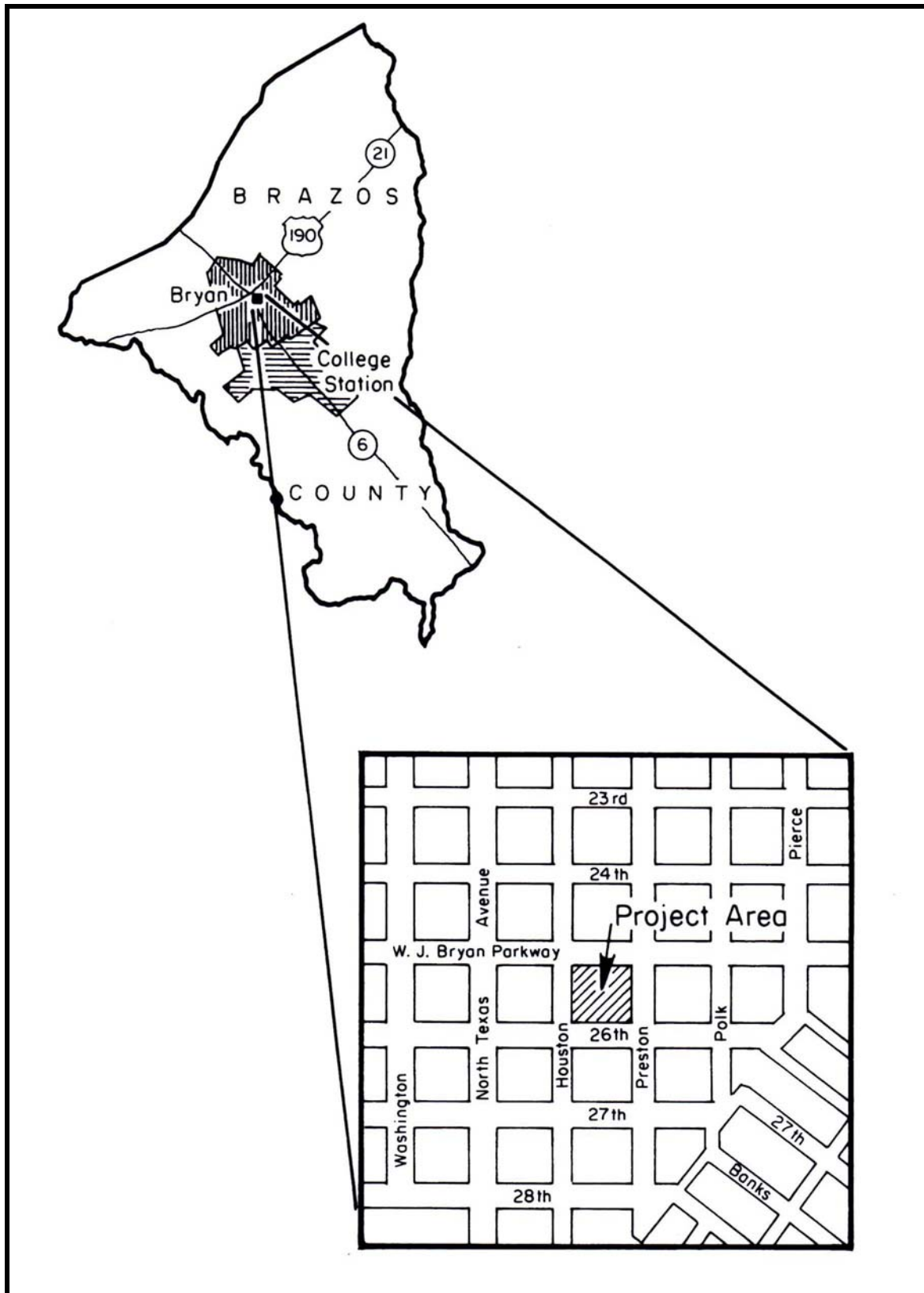


Figure 1. Location of Project Area within Brazos County

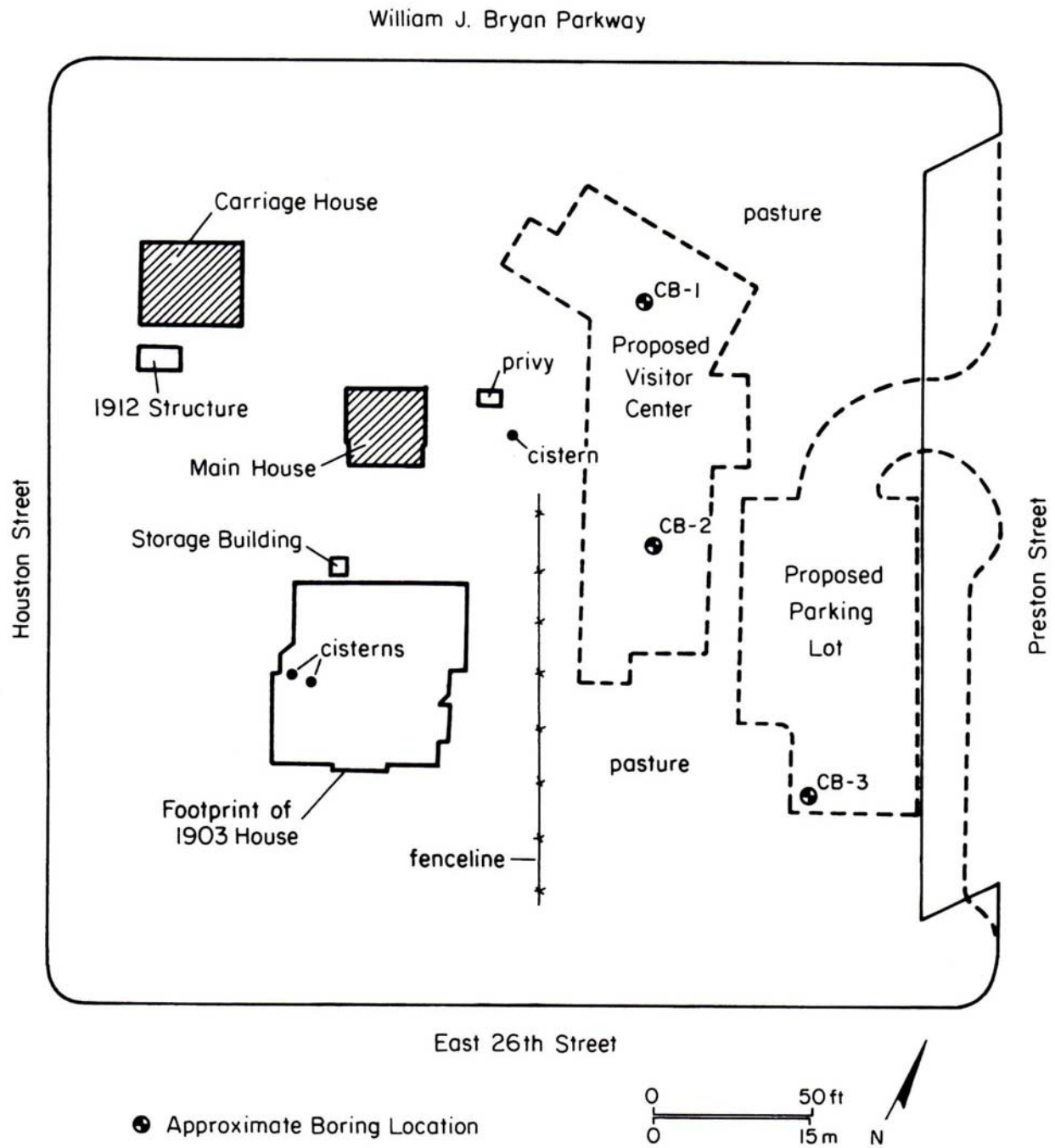


Figure 2. Project Area Map

METHODS

Prior to this investigation a "desk top" survey was performed by BVRA (Moore 2001). This study reviewed and integrated information collected by various researchers interested in the history of the buildings that once occupied Block 51. These reports contain information taken from the County Courthouse (deed records), City of Bryan library archives, Texas A&M University archives, Brazos County Appraisal District, Brazos County Tax Assessor's Office, and interviews with Brazos County Heritage Society members. The results of this research appears in the *Results and Conclusions* section below.

Soil data on the site were obtained from a geotechnical investigation of the proposed construction area by Buchanan/Soil Mechanics, Inc. of Bryan, Texas. The location of these soil borings are shown in Figure 2. In addition, the project area was examined by the Principal Investigator and draftsman in order to collect data used (in conjunction with other maps drafted by previous researchers) to create the project area map depicted in this report.

The methods employed during the current subsurface survey involved the use of a gradall that stripped the soil away to expose the subsurface where historic features may be present. The presence of features is the primary target of this investigation rather than an occupational surface. The area of proposed construction was not flagged in the field. Therefore, the field crew, utilizing the project area map, scaled off a larger, inclusive area to be investigated that includes the entire construction site (Figure 3). The soil was stripped away from the grassy pasture in thin slices from the surface into the underlying, undisturbed natural clay (Figure 4). The depth of this stripping was not consistent and varied within the project area between 10 and 25 cm. A monitor with experience in urban archaeology was present during this process. Prior to the mechanical stripping, an exploratory trench was excavated to a depth of 50 cm in order to define the sequence of fill deposition (if any) and the depth of natural soil (Figure 5). A typical soil profile was photographed and drawn. The drafted version of this profile appears as Figure 6.

One feature, a trash dump, was encountered. This feature is described in this report as Feature 1, and its location was plotted on the project area map (Figure 3). The artifacts were inventoried in the field and not collected.

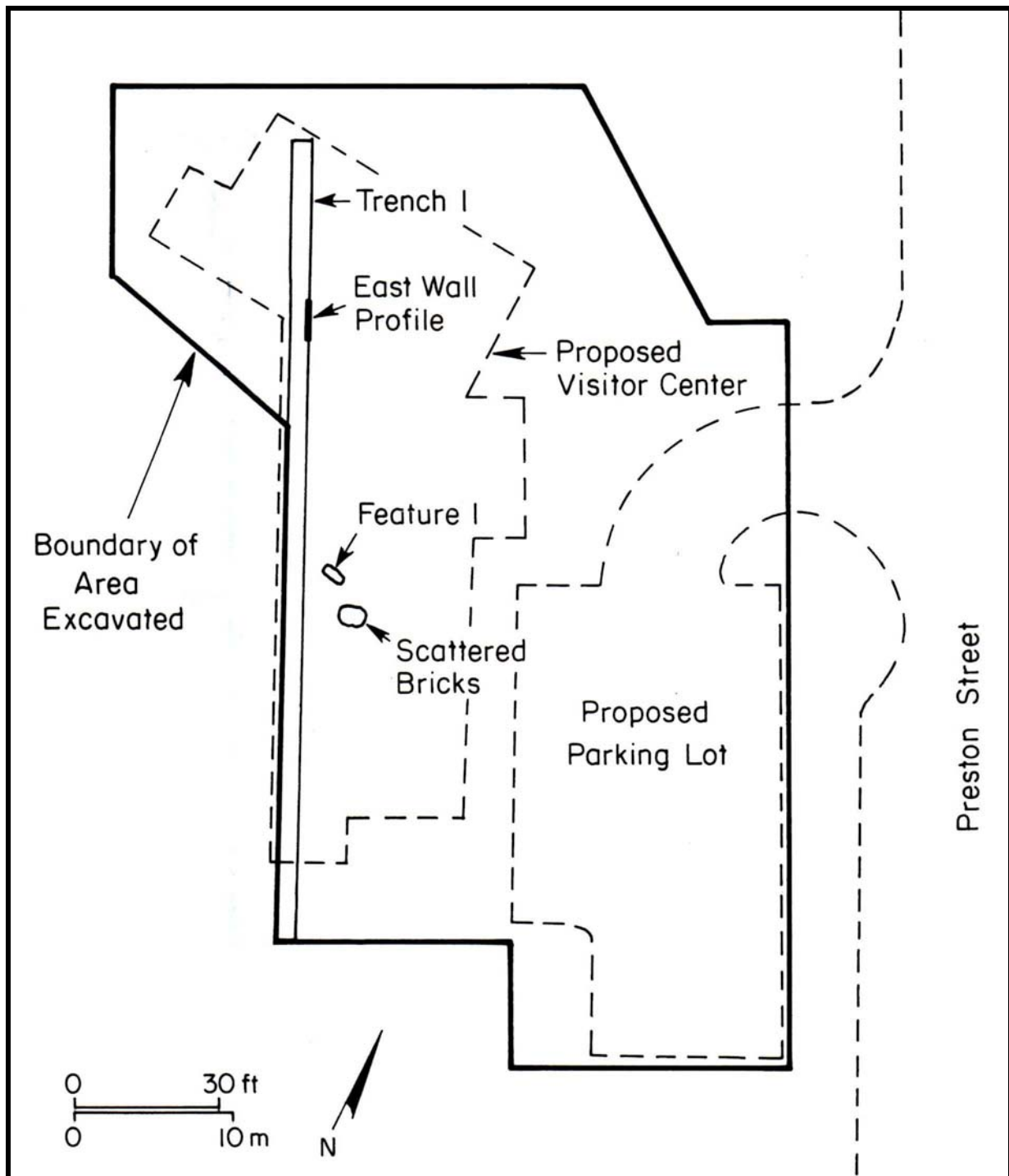


Figure 3. Area Investigated



Figure 4. Mechanical Stripping of Project Area



Figure 5. Trench 1 Depicting Plow Scars

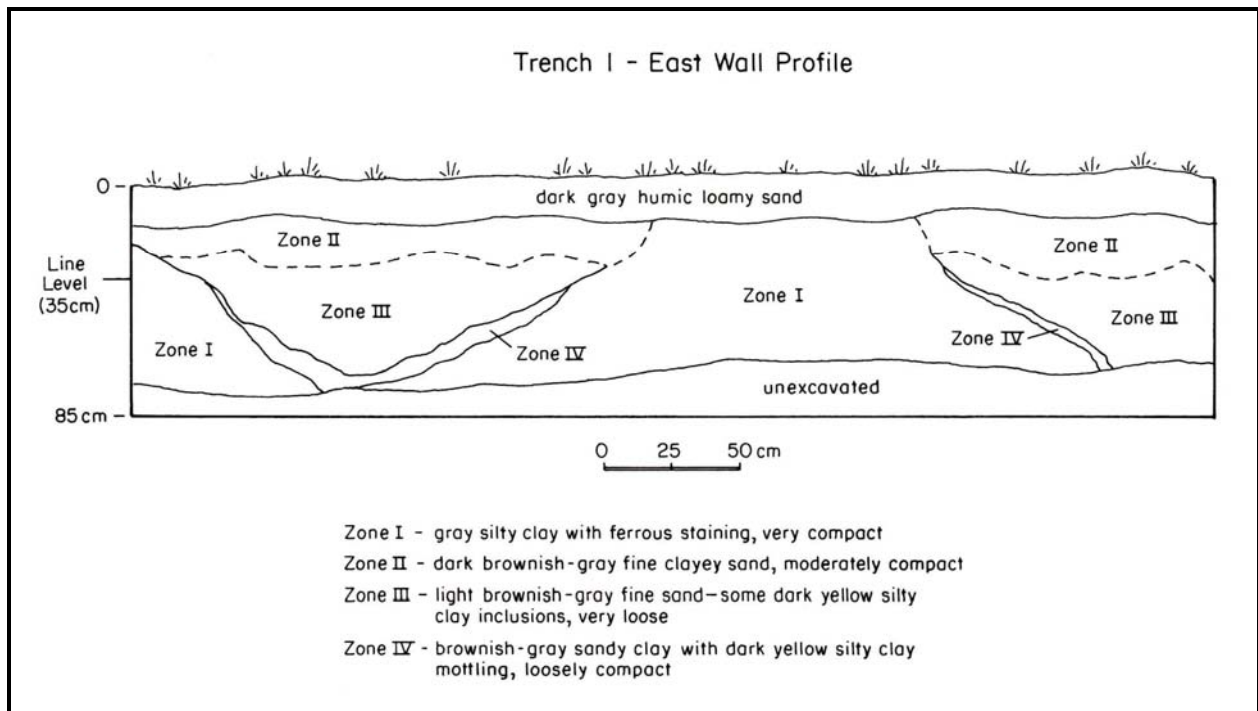


Figure 6. Profile of Backhoe Trench 1

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Boonville, the site of the first county seat in Brazos County, was located approximately two miles northeast of the present town of Bryan. This town was established in 1841 and remained prosperous until 1866 when the railroad was built in Bryan. The residents of Boonville voted at that time to move the county seat to Bryan. Today the site of Boonville is marked by a cemetery and a Texas Centennial monument (Webb 1952:188). The town of Bryan lies at the junction of the Texas and New Orleans and the International Great Northern railroads in an area settled by Stephen F. Austin's colonists along the Brazos River between 1821 and 1831. The town was founded in 1865 when William Joel Bryan donated land for the town site (Webb 1952:234).

Previous archaeological projects involving significant historic sites in Brazos County are restricted to two investigations at the Richard Carter site (41BZ74) in College Station in the 1980s (Carlson 1983, 1987). The Carter site represents the "earliest historic settlement within the corporate limits of College Station" (Carlson 1983:iii) at circa 1831. The site remained with the same family until 1883.

This study, therefore, is the third archaeological investigation of a historic site following the two previous studies at the Carter site by Ms. Carlson.

The early history of Block 51 is somewhat confusing. According to one source (Hawthorne 1991), the Coulter house began as a seven-room structure built by Thomas D. Harrison who apparently paid taxes on this property in 1869. This description of the house conflicts with that provided by Grots et al. (1991) in that they state the house began as a two-room structure. It is known, however, that John William Coulter was living there by the early 1870s with his family. According to Grots et al. (1991), this structure was expanded, probably in the 1870s, as a room was added to the north creating a three-room building. Sometime in the 1890s, the one room addition and half of the original dog-run was demolished leaving the enclosed breezeway and the other half of the dog-run (Grots et al. 1991). Thus, the integrity of this significant structure, now referred to as a remnant house, has been compromised. The original house as it appears today following restoration by the descendants of the Coulter family is depicted in Figure 7.

A carriage house was constructed to the northwest of the original house about 1888 on the northwest corner of the property. No information was found regarding the history of this structure. In a detailed study of this building by Hawthorne et al. (1991) the hypothesis was made that some of the wood used in its construction may have come from the original 1860s house, possibly about the time it was moved to make room for the 1903 house discussed below. Figure 8 depicts the carriage house as it appears today following restoration by the descendants of the Coulter family.



Figure 7. John W. Coulter House



Figure 8. Carriage House

The Coulter family outgrew the small residence, and a new house was constructed by the architectural firm Wemyss-Smith in Waco. To make room for the new house, the original structure was moved "back, out of the way of the new house under construction" (Hawthorne 1991:8) where it continued to house servants. It seems likely that the original house was located within the current footprint of the 1903 house. This argument seems to be supported by the presence of a cistern within the footprint of the 1903 structure (Figure 2). Alternately, it is possible that the cistern was built to serve the 1903 house. In this instance the cistern would have underlain the floor of the home and water would have been accessed by a hand pump.

The 1903 house is much better documented than the original dog-run building. Several photographs of it are on file at the Bryan Public Library, and the lot is depicted on the 1912 Sanborn Insurance Map. According to a study conducted by the Department of Architecture and the Historic Imaging Laboratory, Texas A&M University (1992:4), the 1903 house had three cisterns. This structure was moved from its original location (Block 51) to the Gay Hill community in Fayette County, Texas in 1975 where it remains today.

An inspection of the area by the current field crew located two cisterns (Figure 2), and some bricks obscured by grass that may represent the third cistern (not depicted).

Following the restoration of the remnant house by a local firm at the expense of the Coulter family descendants, a cistern was located and capped (Figure 2). Also, the location of a recently demolished privy adjacent to the remnant house (Figure 2) has been identified (Hawthorne et al. 1991:2). A field inspection by the current field crew located a depression that is believed to be the site of the privy (Figure 2).

The extensive research conducted for this project has not revealed any evidence of historic utilization of the area that will be affected by construction of the visitor center. A verbal description of the block by an earlier resident of the area states that after the 1903 house was built the smaller house was occupied by a servant with fence lines separating the block into quadrants. The quadrant on the northeast corner was used as pasture for a cow that was milked in the stall on the north side of the carriage house. There was a small pond in the pasture area, but its location has not been identified.

Following the removal of the 1903 house, City Block 51 has remained idle until renovation of the remnant house by the Coulter family.

A geotechnical investigation of the proposed construction area was conducted by Buchanan/Soil Mechanics, Inc. of Bryan, Texas on July 18, 2001. Three cores were bored in the area. The logs of these borings reveal essentially undisturbed natural soil at the surface and offer no evidence of fill deposition at the site. The absence of evidence for extensive near-surface disturbance suggests that there is reasonable potential for intact archaeological deposits.

In the earlier assessment by BVRA (Moore 2001) Block 51 was divided into two areas to be considered prior to construction of the visitor center. They are the site of the remnant house, existing carriage house, and footprint of the 1903 house (Area A) and the unimproved section outside the fence line of the 1903 house that will house the museum and parking lot (Area B). Area A will be affected by construction of foot paths, historical markers, trees and shrubs, and a dry rock wall outlining the footprint of the 1903 house site.

Area B, however, will be permanently altered through construction of the museum (including restrooms) and parking lot. Based on the archival work that has been conducted to date it was the opinion of BVRA that Area A is the only portion of Block 51 that contained standing structures. It seemed likely that all cisterns and privies are located in this area as well. Therefore, it was hypothesized that there is a moderate probability that pre-1870 features exist within Area B. An example of a class of feature that may be found at a greater distance from the residences and within Area B are trash pits. It seems probable that the presence of any previous structures in either Area A or Area B would have been identified through the archival work conducted by the various researchers.

Subsurface Survey

In general, that portion of Block 51 investigated represents an area that was used for pasture. Oral history mentions the northeast portion of the project area used as a pasture and a milk cow as well as a pond in the area. The mechanical stripping did not reveal any evidence that a pond was present. What it did reveal was the presence of plow scars throughout the area investigated. They occur at intervals of approximately 1 m and are oriented at 40 degrees east of North. The direction of the plow scars suggests that the area had been in cultivation prior to the platting of Block 51 and the documented usage of the area as pasture. These scars are illustrated in a photograph of Trench 1 (Figure 5), the soil profile drawing (Figure 6), and a photograph of the soil profile (Figure 9).

A small, amorphous trash dump was found at 37 cm below the existing ground surface. It extended to 46 cm at its deepest point (Figure 3). The size of this feature was measured at 80 x 270 cm. The majority of artifacts were concentrated in the western third of the feature, and the artifact density tapered off toward the east. The feature was located in a sandy matrix bounded on the north and east by clays with more sterile sand to the south and west. It contained pieces of concrete, terra cotta pottery, a round nail, window glass, snuff bottle fragments, beer bottle fragments, milky white glass (Ponds jar) ceramics (probably plates), animal bone, and modern brick fragments. The artifacts date to the early 20th century and are not significant. Two segments of modern, but not currently used, sewer pipe were located. They are also not significant.

Three meters south of Feature 5 modern bricks and brick fragments were observed. These appear to be an area where bricks were discarded, and they were not identified as a feature.



Figure 9. Soil Profile Depicting Plow Scars

RECOMMENDATIONS

No features dating to 1870 or earlier were identified as a result of this investigation. It is, therefore, recommended that construction of the visitor center and parking lot be allowed to proceed as currently planned.

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